WRITING AS A PRACTICE OF FREEDOM: HBCU WRITING CENTERS AS SITES OF LIBERATORY PRACTICE

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Most of my time as a graduate student I spent critiquing the welcoming space of the predominately white writing center and asking: whom is this space supposed to welcome and whom is it intended to leave unwelcome? I wondered how a space that was supposed to be visually welcoming could continue to reconstitute certain raced and classed hierarchies with its performance of domestic life and its presupposed upper middle-class domestic comforts (Singh-Corcoran & Emika). Once I graduated, and because of the racial trauma I faced during my graduate studies at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), I looked for a place and space that felt more familiar: a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), and I found the HBCU in which I wanted to work and the students whom I desired to teach.

As I transitioned into my new position as Assistant Professor of English, I began to notice the differences both subtle and not so subtle of how our Writing Center functions and serves students. Gone were the sofas, laptops, coffee pots, and plants, "writing center spaces" that tended "to be marked with particular objects to achieve a certain mood, serve specific purposes, or send a particular message to those who use the space" (Grutsch-McKinney 7). However, in this writing center, the well-lit rooms filled with students, faculty, and tutors who bustled around the writing center—regardless if they needed to be there working on a paper, running the front desk, or tutoring students—were simply not there. Gone were the painted walls, the photographs, the stuffed animals welcoming each person at the door. Gone were the resources that made those images even possible.

Instead, what I saw and encountered was a time machine carrying me back to days when writing centers were writing labs located in poorly lit basements that were lined with desktops in rows of two. This center was often a place where most students sought assistance only because of teacher encouragement or by mandated course requirement. However, lack of pretty trappings aside, our writing center also gave way to a more emotional, pathos-driven writing center where students who came to the writing center—at times feeling as if they were being punished for their "bad grammar," which was, by and large, their vast linguistic diversity—where students were able to work with more tutors with black and brown faces. These were faces often resembling their own. As Anna J. Egalite and Brian Kasida explain, "Minority students might benefit from seeing adults with a similar racial/ethnic background in a position of authority. Such representation could increase the cultural value students place on academic success and perhaps reduce the stigma of 'acting white'" (Egalite and Kasisa).

This writing center was a space where their writing became secondary to what was occurring in their everyday lives that might cause writer's block. This writing center allowed tutors to discuss with students how their lives may positively or negatively affect their writing. Accordingly, recent studies show that many university students have significant worries about paying off school loans (Grabmeier) and dealing with their various mental health issues. Amu Novotney notes that "about one-third of U.S. college students had difficulty functioning in the last 12 months due to depression, and almost half said they felt overwhelming anxiety in the last year" (Novotney). However, the students we encountered spoke about not only these problems, but also their involvement in gangs, early mother- or fatherhood, STDs (e.g., HIV), as well as their extreme poverty. While these concerns are not unique to people of color, they are more prevalent in economically and racially disenfranchised students—students who may not have the resources to hide their societal woes and the concerns they have (perceived or not) about their impoverished writing and/or oratory skills.

To be frank: many of the students we worked with were dealing with and spoke openly of these struggles and asked how they might be able to correlate the ways writing could help them—if it could—find a way out of their individual and social ghettoization. In other words, they asked how writing could free them, when writing and learning to write had done nothing but oppress them. Thus, our tutors had to find connections with former gang members' literacy "issues" by walking them through assignment sheets, helping them dissect and then understand what assignments were asking them to accomplish, with how that assignment (or broadly a general education writing

course) could give them an opportunity—a way out of the circumstances they knew so well—circumstances and situations that, while suspect, had somehow provided for them and landed them here in our institution and in our writing center space. Tutors here had to find ways to assist students in finding relatability and relevance in each assignment put before them. It was imperative and at times crucial to their very lives, lest they go back to what was before.

Essentially, and keeping in line with writing center best practices, our writing center does not focus on the product (the essay to be written). It focuses on those who must write the essay; those who do not, have never, and will never consider themselves writers; those who know that whether they like, love, or hate writing is irrelevant to the very real fact that they will have to write. And as I often tell my own students, *if you have to write, regardless if it's your jam, then you might as well do it well.*

The tutors in this writing center deal with more than students struggling with an assignment. They deal with young students struggling to take care of their children as single moms and dads at eighteen years old. They assist students who do not understand writing about writing because they need to navigate a court system that has writing that they 1) can barely understand [as is intended] and 2) can barely get a sense of how that writing impacts their very ability to exist as a free person [as is intended]. They aid students who want to be lawyers because they "can talk" and understand that any successful lawyer must read, analyze, and write before they dare speak sideways out they mouths to a judge and jury. They guide students who want to work in social services because not that long ago, they were taken from their mothers and fathers.

The tutors at this writing center hear these stories, understand these stories, and in some ways have lived these stories. They do not see them as writers, but as people who must use writing to effectively navigate that court system so they can get child support, apply for a loan, formally ask for rent extensions, understand and fill out Work-Study forms, so they can financially support their children. These tutors assist these students in showing them not only how writing assists them in navigating a course, but in navigating life. In our writing center we attempt to foster it as a place of love, of care, of genuine concern for the well-being of these students both intellectually (with regard to their academics) and socially (with regard to their daily lives).

This writing center need not be "pretty." It need not have the trivial trappings to which so many in the PWI have grown accustomed. This writing center has and houses more: the ability to show people who use writing in their daily lives why writing is about more than grades, why writing is about more than words on a page, how writing has been used to free them as much as chain them, and how--through writing—they can find a way to make a better life for themselves and their family. The tutoring that happens here shows them how writing can loosen the chains of their lives if only they commit, do the work, and work at seeing the ways writing impacts them and they impact the writing around them. These tutors help them loosen their chains, not because students are writing an assignment, but because students who use writing need it to be more than for a grade: these students need their writing to be a practice that assists them in their everyday lives as they navigate their jobs, social services, the legal system, etcetera. Essentially, they need writing to be a practice of freedom. And here our tutors are showing them the way.

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